

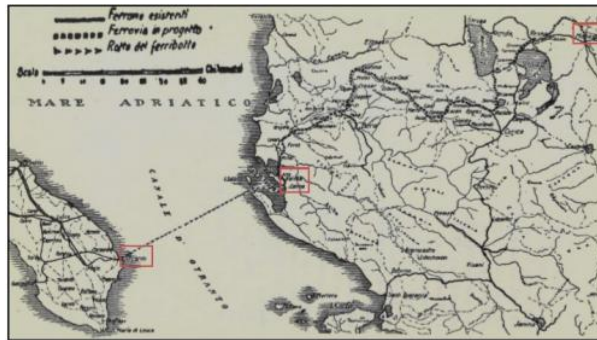
Italy's failed project for the Trans-Balkan railway "Rome-Valona-Constantinople"

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ABSTRACT

Running East-West through the southern Balkans, the "Corridor VIII" is one of today's ten Pan-European corridors. It connects the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi to the Bulgarian ports of Burgas and Varna via Albania and North Macedonia by means of both railways and roads. The idea of building such a latitudinal axis in the Balkans linking the Adriatic to the Black Sea dates back to the last decades of the XIXth century, when after the Ottoman Empire had first tried and failed, Italy took over the project of the so-called Trans-Balkan railway. In spite of continuous efforts up to the Interwar, this "iron highway" remained for a long time on paper though, because of a lack of financial resources, wars and poor strategic-diplomatic planning.





Connecting the Adriatic Sea to Constantinople: the Ottoman-German Orientbahn extension plan

Up to the Great War, railway routes in Central Europe and the Balkan Peninsula, and thus the transit traffic from Western to Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, were completely under German and Austro-Hungarian control. The backbone of this large network was the *Orientbahn*, namely a longitudinal “iron highway” that, running down the Balkans, connected Berlin and Vienna to Salonika and Constantinople via Budapest and Belgrade.

Eager to develop its own railway system, in October 1890 the Sublime Porte granted the *Deutsche Bank* a concession to construct a branch of the *Orientbahn* connecting Salonika to Monastir (today’s Bitola, North Macedonia). It was also agreed that the contractor - the *Société du Chemin de Fer ottoman Salonique-Monastir* - should explore the possibility to further extend the railway to the Albanian coast at Durazzo (in Albanian, Durrës)

or Valona (in Albanian, Vlorë). The request of the Turkish government had a clear goal: the stretch from Durazzo or Valona to Monastir, together with the projected junction Salonika-Constantinople, would have created a direct railway link between the Adriatic Sea and the Bosphorus Strait, along the ancient roman *Aegnatia* road.

After identifying Durazzo as the most suitable maritime terminal for the new railway, German engineers found the implementation of the Durazzo-Monastir railway project very costly in terms of both technical efforts and financial resources due to the impervious nature of the Albanian hinterland. Consequently, the *Société du Chemin de Fer ottoman Salonique-Monastir* abandoned it, focusing itself only to the Salonika-Monastir line.

Italy's Trans-Balkan railway project

At this stage, the Italians entered the picture by making the Trans-Balkan railway project their own. In late-xixth century Italy was a fast-growing economy seeking for cheap raw materials and new outlets for its products. For southern Balkans could provide both of them, an "iron *Aegnatia* road" appeared to many prominent member of the Italian political-industrial elite as the most appropriate means of transportation through which to reach that undeveloped area. Thus, the bank *Credito Mobiliare Italiano*, the railway construction company *Almagià* and the Salonika-based firm *Fratelli Allatini* - whose owners controlled also the *Banque de Salonique* - formed a consortium in order to replace the *Deutsche Bank* in the Trans-Balkan railway project. In 1893, however, the Italian experts reached the same conclusions as their German colleagues: the costs for the Durazzo-Monastir line - which would require extensive engineering works including the drilling of more than three kilometres of tunnels through the rugged Albanian mountains - exceeded the expected commercial benefits. As a result, the Italians decided to shelve the project, which was thus consigned to oblivion.

The Italian scheme for a Trans-Balkan railway revived after the outbreak of the Great War thanks to a Neapolitan engineer, Giacomo Buonomo, who planned to connect Rome to Constantinople via the ports of Otranto and Valona. More precisely, his goal was to link the Italian railways to the *Orientbahn* section Monastir-Salonika-Constantinople by means of a ferryboat service through the Otranto Strait and the construction of the railway junction Valona-Monastir. At first light, Buonomo's project for a Trans-Balkan railway line "Rome-Valona-Constantinople" seemed just an elaborate version of the 1890 scheme. However, the choice of Valona instead of Durazzo as Italy's gateway to the Balkans was not a minor detail. Albania had gained its independence in 1912, in the context of the Balkan Wars. However, the clash between the Entente Powers and the Central Empires sharpened Italy's territorial ambitions towards the south-eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea. In April 1915, Italy indeed signed with Britain, France and Russia the Pact of London, through which Rome had to declare war on its former partners in the Triple Alliance - namely Germany and Austria-Hungary - in exchange for territorial concessions. Among other things, the treaty acknowledged Italy's right to receive full sovereignty over Valona and its hinterland. This meant that the most strategic section of the Trans-Balkan railway would be directly under Italian control once the war is over. Buonomo presented his project in February 1916, attracting a lot of private and public attention. In July 1917, the banks *Credito Italiano*, *Banca Commerciale Italiana* and *Compagnia Italo-Britannica*, together with a group of prominent businessman, established the *Comitato per la Transbalcanica Italiana* (Committee for the Italian Trans-Balkan), chaired by Buonomo. After making land surveys and alignment plans on Albanian soil, in August 1918 the *Comitato* submitted the final draft of the project to the Higher Council of Public Works.

For during the war the Italian Army had occupied Valona together with a great portion of southern Albania, in November 1918 the Italian government not only approved Buonomo's scheme, but also authorised the latter to build the first section of the railway connecting Valona to Mifoli, a small town located few kilometres north of Valona. However, from that moment onwards, for Buonomo things went from bad to worse. During the first half of 1919 the tracks construction made only little progress mainly due to a demotivated and unskilled labour force composed of Austrian prisoners of war and a handful of Navy Corps of Engineers officers. Following the signing of the Treaty of Saint-Germain in September 1919 between the Allied Powers and the new Republic of Austria, the

Austrian prisoners caught in Albania were repatriated, prompting the Prime Minister, Francesco S. Nitti, to order Buonomo a temporary suspension of work. Meanwhile, Italo-Albanian relations deteriorated. At the Peace Conference, the Italian delegates not only demanded, besides Valona, a League of Nations mandate over Albania, but in July 1919 also recognised Greece's claims over some Albanian districts by signing the so-called Tittoni-Venizelos agreement. Eager to defend the territorial integrity of their country, the Albanians eventually rose against the Italian troops in Valona, forcing them, in August 1920, to withdraw from the city. As a result, the Trans-Balkan railway project was formally abandoned.

From the Italian Trans-Balkan railway scheme to the Pan-European “Corridor VIII”

The plan of permitting a railway continuity between Italy and the southern Balkans returned onto the Italian political stage during the Fascist period. However, three main factors prevented its implementation: Benito Mussolini's economic dirigisme – a policy favouring state-owned enterprises at the expense of private groups; a persistent political instability in Albania during the period 1920-1925; and last, the mutual hostility which characterised Italo-Yugoslav relations during the Fascist regime. Eager to bypass such difficulties, at the turn of the 1930s Buonomo traced a new layout for the railway, replacing Monastir – which was part of Yugoslavia – with Florina, a Greek city close to Albania's southern border. But the fading interest in a Trans-Balkan railway and the outbreak of the Second World War blocked the project once again.

For Albania became a member of the East European Communist bloc, during the Cold War the Trans-Balkan railway scheme was completely left aside. Because of its huge impact on both the integration process and economic exchanges, the project has been resumed in 1991 by EU policymakers, forming the bulk of the so-called “Corridor VIII” project.

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